

## HUMANITIES AND WAR?

by Donald Anderson, Editor



From time out of mind, war and art have reflected one another, and it is this intersection of war and art that *War, Literature & the Arts* seeks to illuminate. This has been our purpose since 1989, when we published our first issue. I suppose we wanted to believe then what we want to believe now: that should we accurately and effectively portray war then we can be more hopeful that we will thoughtfully and judiciously prosecute war when war becomes necessary.

If it seems to fall to the historian to make distinctions among wars, each war's larger means and ends, the trajectory for the artist, regardless of culture or time, seems to fall towards an individual's plight, the means and ends of war played out in the personal. After all, soldiers, more than anyone, know—or discover—what can be destroyed. We live in a culture that values the individual. Our works of art about war mirror this.

Of course Art and Life are different—if they weren't we wouldn't need art. And if Art generally strains towards making sense and finding meaning, we also know that Life is under no such obligation.

One of the last century's most politically minded and politically active artists, W.H. Auden came into his fullness as a poet as fascism was creeping across Europe. He wrote about that scourge and then concluded that "poetry makes nothing happen," that nothing he ever wrote saved a single Jew from the gas chambers.

Nonetheless, Art markets some authority, else why would officials at the United Nations decide to cover the tapestry of Pablo Picasso's searing tableau *Guernica*, as council members met to discuss the start of Gulf War II?

We know that if Art were the single answer, there would have been an end to war after *The Iliad* was first sung. That said, artistically and emotionally accurate rendering of war and war's aftermath is too important and humanizing to ignore.

Critical thinking does not, as a matter of course, conform to convention. One of the functions of art is to disturb the status quo, to force us to view the world anew, to consider our capacities to build or tear down.

In the long haul of history, a stone ax crushing a skull is no different from a Tomahawk missile except in its efficiency. We have as much to learn from *The Iliad* as we do from *The Red Badge of Courage*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Platoon*, or *Black Hawk Down*.

At its best, **WLA** is witness to the power of word and image and for the human necessity for art. We would, however, be dismissive of the complexity of the subject **WLA** seeks to explore, if we don't remind ourselves of John Stuart Mill's notion that war, although an ugly thing, is *not* the ugliest of things. More spurious, Mill instructs, is the person who is unwilling to fight for anything larger than his or her own personal safety.



In **WLA**, we strive to include voices from many perspectives. Soldiers and victims can be positive about the effects of war. Soldiers and victims can be negative about the effects of war. Some citizens gain faith as a consequence of war. Some lose faith.

We sense that Tim O'Brien hits the mark when he writes in "How To Tell a True War Story":

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

And:

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.

Aristotle's notion that History accretes, but only Poetry unifies is a notion we subscribe to. Facts are often a poor basis for significance. As the late British writer V.S. Pritchett said: "It's all in the art—you get no credit for the living."

The value of art is that it allows us to live in a larger world, allows us to live *other* lives, all of which allows us to examine more fully the quality and meaning of our *own* lives. Whose very earliest recollections do not include the request, 'Tell me a Story?' The human race needs stories. We need all the experience we can get.

While the opinions expressed in this journal may not necessarily be those of the editors or the United States Air Force, **WLA** exists as a forum for many voices seeking an understanding of war and art, and the intersection of the two. What we trust most can agree upon is that Art, at its deepest level, is about preserving the world.